

Segregation in Government Departments

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REPORT OF AN INVESTIGATION

New York, Nov. 1, 1913.

To the Chairman of the Board of Directors,
National Association for the
Advancement of Colored People.

My dear Sir:

In compliance with your request, I submit herewith a report of my investigation of the segregation of colored employees in government departments.

Segregation is no new thing in Washington and the present administration cannot be said to have inaugurated it. The past few months of Democratic Party control, however, have given segregation impetus and have been marked by more than a beginning of systematic enforcement. It is becoming known as a policy of the present government.

The effect is startling. Those segregated are regarded as a people set apart, almost as lepers. Instead of allaying race prejudice, as some of the advocates of segregation would have us believe, recognition has emphasized it. In fact, government approval in some cases has aroused it where it did not exist.

In saying they favor segregation, many white employees seem not to be expressing their own convictions so much as to be reflecting what they regard as the spirit of the new administration. Those who have been appointed in previous administrations apparently think that if they do not put themselves on record as approving this policy, the danger of losing their positions will be thereby increased. How far this attitude is the result of official suggestion cannot be ascertained. A well-known person who is in touch with several government officials told the investigator of a personal call upon the chief of one of the departments, an appointee under a previous administration, to urge him to segregate his colored employees for the reason that if he did not he might expect to be succeeded by someone who would. Immediate results bear witness that he acted promptly upon this suggestion.

The same person further stated that the white people really do not object to the colored people particularly as a race, but are using this worn out prejudice as an excuse to get their positions. If the colored people protest against segregation, it probably would be only a question of time before the present Civil Service Act was annulled and another passed making it possible to deprive all colored people in the service of the government of their positions.

Competition has been eliminated. In time the few colored people who are now so expert as to prevent their being segregated will leave the government service and their positions will be filled by white people. Colored clerks, in other words, will be limited to positions in a few offices which have been designated for colored help only. Those who advance the argument that assigning a given division to colored clerks will give the latter a chance to test the efficiency of the race ignore the fact that efficiency can be developed only by competition which is the basis of all economic opportunity.

The investigator visited the following departments. Segregation may be more or less in force in other departments, such as the Bureau of the Census, but only those departments were visited where it was said to have increased considerably under the present administration:

BUREAU OF ENGRAVING AND PRINTING:

Here colored clerks are segregated in work by being placed at separate tables and in separate sections of rooms whenever possible. White guides told the investigator that it was to be the future policy of the Bureau to segregate all its colored employees, but that this could not be strictly enforced until the Bureau moved into its new building.

In both the Miscellaneous Division and Examining Division segregation has been increased. In the former Division, the employees operate perforating machines, one on either side, perforating the blocks of stamps. Here the workers have been paired according to race. In the same room the counters of these

stamps have also been segregated according to color. In the Examining Division where tissue separating is carried on, the employees have been grouped according to color.

Colored girls no longer use the lunch rooms which for nine years they have been using in common with white girls. (See articles in LaFollette's Magazine, August 23, August 30.) Though no official order was issued in regard to this, since Director Ralph told the three colored girls who had been eating in these lunch rooms that they must use a separate table, they have left and gone to the rooms assigned to them. These are most unpleasant, the wash rooms, lavatories and lunch rooms being all in one. One girl who objected has since been discharged.

POST OFFICE DEPARTMENT:

In the Dead Letter Office colored men and women have been segregated back of lockers in one corner of the room. The guide (the Superintendent of the building) explained to the investigator that these lockers had to be moved because in their former position they had interfered with ventilation. He was unable, however, to give a satisfactory explanation of how it happened that all the clerks behind these lockers were colored. The reason could not have been lack of efficiency, because the colored men here were doing a fairly high grade of work, that is, sorting letters and delegating them to the proper division. In another room where the purely mechanical process of opening letters was carried on, all the clerks were white.

Later the investigator learned on credible authority that up to May 29, of the thousands of clerks employed in the Post Office Department, seven only were colored, three being in the Dead Letter Division, three in the Bureau of Supplies and one in the office of the Chief Post Office Inspector. On the day following, Decoration Day, these men were assembled back of the lockers mentioned above. Contrasted with this "Jim Crowing" of colored clerks is the apparent lack of opposition to the employment of colored messengers or laborers in this Department and even of colored clerks drawing clerical pay, provided they do the work of messengers or laborers. There are now six colored men on the clerical roll who do messenger service. The authority quoted stated further that of the seven colored clerks now in the Post Office Department six have been included in a recent order transferring sixty clerks from the United States Post Office Department to the City Post Office, leaving one colored clerk in the United States Post Office Department.

No lunch room is provided for the colored employees in the Post Office Department. The white employees have a very attractive room. The guide advanced as a convincing argument in explanation of this condition that as no restaurants in Washington were open to colored people, the government could not be expected to furnish one. He further stated that only one colored man had "ever given them trouble" by trying to get his lunch in this room and that had happened but once.

TREASURY DEPARTMENT:

In the Treasury Department there are about 270 colored employees. In the Treasury Building the colored clerks are scattered throughout the offices and have not yet been segregated, though it seems to be understood that an attempt will be made to assemble as many as possible in the Registry Division. The investigator visited twelve offices in this department finding in each colored clerks working with white clerks; in some offices working with white women:

In the Office of the Auditor for the Post Office which is a part of the Treasury Department but situated in the Post Office Building, segregation seems to have been carefully worked out. Mr. Kram, the Chief, a hold-over from the Taft administration, took pains to emphasize the point that he had been segregating colored employees for five years and that as far as his office was concerned, it was no new departure. He further stated that he would not lose an opportunity to perfect it. He admitted he had been able to segregate without interference with the work of his office because in the last few years he had been introducing a new system known as the tabulating system, which reduces many of the processes of the work to an absolutely mechanical level. If, for instance, he has one hundred clerks working on the "key punch," it is very easy to segregate the colored clerks and place them in a separate room or alcove. This has been done. In one room colored men operate what is known as the "gang punch" and in another room, the force working at the "assorting machines" is entirely colored. White operatives doing the same work occupy separate rooms.

In one alcove which the investigator visited there were nine colored women working on the "key punch." The light and ventilation were poor. These women had been moved several times but originally had been in rooms with white clerks where they had good light and air. While the new tabulating system was being

introduced, Mr. Kram's office had been excused by Congress from making all of the audit of a certain year. As the omission of this audit has been brought as a criticism against this office, he has since decided to have it made. This, apparently, afforded the excuse for moving these colored women, since the rooms they occupied (with the white clerks) were necessary for the corps of bookkeepers who were to rush through this arrears in work. All the clerks, both white and colored, were moved out. The white clerks, however, were scattered in rooms where they have good light and ventilation, while the colored women were segregated in the alcove mentioned above. As usual, those segregated were placed in the poorest quarters.

In some of the rooms of this office white and colored employees still work together. For example, in the mail and files room there were six white and four colored employees. In two rooms which had been set aside for fourth grade bookkeepers colored and white employees were working together. There were no women in this room. The obvious intention is to segregate ultimately the colored bookkeepers in one of these rooms and the white in the other. As an indication of the feeling of the colored people in regard to this segregation may be cited the case of an old colored bookkeeper who has recently been reduced from first grade to fourth grade bookkeeper with no change in salary. The reason assigned was that he could not do first grade work. This may be true. He resented the change bitterly and his chief told the investigator that he had cried like a baby when he was moved, not so much because of the reduction in work, but because he felt that taking him out of the room where he had sat for ten or more years with white people, including women, was a reflection upon him personally. The investigator overheard the chief of the Division, Mr. Kram, ask several of these women if they did not miss the old bookkeeper. They all replied they did and spoke of him in the kindest manner.

One of the most interesting rooms in this department is where international coupons are audited. Mr. Kram explained that this was as difficult work as was done in his office and that he had found colored men more expert in it than white men. The investigator understood that the four men employed here, all colored, in charge of a fifth, also colored, had gradually been collected from other parts of the office. Those who advance the argument in favor of segregation that it will give the colored people a chance to demonstrate their efficiency as a race had better avoid this room, for the colored men placed here had first proved their ability, not by competing with members of their own race, but by competition with white men whom they have beaten in a fair contest.

Another illustration of how economic efficiency refuses to follow the color line is the case of a young colored man who has become an expert operator on the adding machine. He is the only colored clerk employed in a room of white clerks doing the same work. Mr. Kram, when asked why he left him here, said he could not spare him as he was his most expert operator. Here again the colored man won in competition not with his own race but with the white man. X

That the basis of the whole segregation idea is caste and not race was indicated by the fact that both the Superintendent of the Post Office Building and the clerk who acted as guide in the Treasury Department repeatedly called attention to the absence of segregation in the cleaning forces, emphasizing the fairness with which the colored help is treated. When pressed for an explanation of this apparent inconsistency in policy, they stated that they had had no complaint from the "white scrub ladies." In answer to the question as to what would be the procedure should difficulty arise, they said it would be impossible to segregate without interfering with the efficiency of the work.

Another difficulty in carrying out segregation by color consistently unexpectedly arose, to the great embarrassment of the clerk who was acting as guide in the Treasury Department. As he was taking the investigator into one of the rooms of the department, he remarked, "There are two in here, that man in the far corner of the room"—turning to a white man at the door—"You are the other colored clerk in here, aren't you?" The reply was too eloquent for publication. It is significant that the man making it was considerably darker than some of the colored clerks who will have to be segregated if the present policy is perfected.

A Southerner in charge of one of the offices in the Treasury Building, mistaking the investigator for a sympathizer, remarked that they wanted to inaugurate segregation everywhere in the Treasury Department but were handicapped because they did not know how to go about it, it being most difficult to determine upon the best method. Before he could give more information he was warned by the guide.

In Washington, history repeats itself in relegating to those segregated what no one else wants or in failing entirely to meet their needs. For example, as has already been indicated, in the Bureau of En-

graving and Printing the lunch room assigned to the colored women is unsanitary. In the Post Office Department there is no lunch room at all for colored help. In the Office of the Auditor for the Post Office, the colored women were taken from light and airy rooms and placed in an unpleasant alcove. In the Dead Letter Office where the colored workers have been grouped back of a row of lockers, the part of the room chosen is the least desirable.

The way in which segregation has been effected so far without official orders is worthy of study. No orders have been issued segregating colored people in their work, yet the practice goes on. Generally the excuse is a readjustment in the work to increase efficiency. In this reorganization clerks are moved from one room to another and when the process is completed the colored clerks always find themselves in some mysterious way together.

The only official order issued in regard to segregation related to lavatories, and this is still in force in the Post Office Division, the Treasury Department and the Bureau of Engraving and Printing. The signs originally posted in the Treasury Department have been taken down. The investigator learned on good authority that they are still posted on the inside and outside of the doors of dressing rooms in the Bureau of Engraving and Printing. Officials in Washington repeatedly call attention to the fact that the colored people have protested against this order but have made no objection to segregation in their work. The reason is, of course, that the colored people are sensitive and resent what they feel to be a personal affront; but more important is the fact that they cannot protest against segregation in their work *when no official orders have been issued in regard to this*. Should they make such complaint they would be asked to cite a discriminating order and failing that would probably be told that the changes made had been necessitated by exigencies in work, color having had nothing to do with it. They would be unable to prove their case and might jeopardize their positions because of "insubordination." Even the white man is not fond of juggling with his bread and butter.

As far as could be ascertained, only one official has given the colored people an opportunity to express their opinion of the policy of segregation. Arrangements for segregation had been made in one of the divisions of the Pension Bureau, but when the Chief of the Division learned that the colored employees were opposed to separation, he gave them an opportunity to vote on the matter. They were unanimous in their opposition. This man is reported to have said that segregation should not be introduced while he was the Chief of this Division.

That the matter is likely to receive future attention seems probable from statements like the following made by a high official in Washington: "We cannot have colored men working in the same room with white women or colored men in charge of departments employing white women." What perhaps might be regarded as the equivalent of this statement a reliable authority quotes another official as saying—"We are determined to reduce these people to menial and subordinate positions."

How long it will be before further steps are taken to perfect the policy of segregation can only be conjectured. There is a persistent rumor in Washington that as soon as fall elections are over in New York and other important cities, a bill already prepared will be forced through Congress introducing "Jim Crow" cars into the District of Columbia.

Respectfully submitted,

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NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF COLORED PEOPLE

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